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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching the writing of poetry is presented in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): A poet's purpose is to amuse, to instruct, to embellish truth, or to vitalize dull reality. Poets compress, using the minimum number of words to gain the maximum effect, yoking seemingly disparate ideas into metaphors, creating poetic shock, leading the reader to expect one idea and then offering another. THE APPROACH (excerpt): One approach I have employed successfully in making students aware of these qualities of the poet is called "Astro Poetry." Students clip the "Astrological Forecast" from the newspaper and bring it to class. We discuss the four types of meaning in a poem: Sense, Feeling, Tone, and Intention. Students read their forecast to get the literal "sense" of the message. They then translate the "sense" into poetic form. To do this, they must capture the "intention" of the original message and transform it into the aim of their poem. They must establish the "feeling" of their poem--serious, humorous, ironic, satiric, didactic. The strings of consecutive words must be coherent, precise and unified, and must be so shaped that they look like a poem--a special arrangement of words on paper. (KC)

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Astro Poetry: Students Working as Poets

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Author's Comment

Poets must have experience, direct or vicarious. They must be openly susceptible, willing to observe closely. They must be selective, choosing only those impressions, observations, details or gleanings which fit the impression they intend to convey, deleting those which add nothing. Poets write from abundance, yet they are economical, stripping their writing of excess—no fat allowed. Their purpose is to amuse, to instruct, to embellish truth or to vitalize dull reality. Poets compress, using the minimum number of words to gain the maximum effect, yoking seemingly disparate ideas into metaphors, creating poetic shock, leading the reader to expect one idea and then offering the reader another.

The Approach

One approach I have employed successfully in making students aware of these qualities of the poet is a strategy I call "Astro Poetry." Students are asked to clip the "Astrological Forecast" from the evening or morning newspaper and to bring the forecast to their next class. Or, I clip the morning forecast, duplicate copies and distribute them to the class.

In class, we first discuss the four types of meaning in a poem, as identified by I.A. Richards in *Practical Criticism: Sense, Feeling, Tone,* and *Intention.* "Sense" refers to the literal meaning of the lines, the plain sense of what is said. "Feeling" is the attitude of the poet toward his subject. "Tone" is the poet's attitude toward his audience, and "intention" is the aim the poet attempts to achieve. I shuffle these "types" to produce an acronym — FIST, the clout of a poem.

Then, students, working individually with their Astro Graph, read their forecast to get the literal "sense" of the message. What they must do next is to generate the first draft of what eventually will be their Astro poem by translating the sense of the astro message into poetic form. To do this, they must capture the "intention" of the original

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message and transform it into the aim of their poem. Also, they must establish the "feeling" of their poem—serious, humorous, ironic, satiric, didactic. The students know they will be asked to read their finished creation to us, so determining "tone" is not too difficult. Their finished poem must have clout — FIST.

The poem's structure is prescribed. The words of the poem must string out in sequence the letters of the student's sign in coherent-sounding connections. One student produced the following Astro poem"

"Aries"

Amorous Reunion

Increases

Enthusiastic Sex.

Another wrote:

"Libra"

Loose-tongued idiots
Bellow

Ridiculous

Accusations.

What should be evident from the above examples is that the strings of consecutive words must not only be coherent, precise and unified but they must also be so shaped that they look like a poem—a special arrangement of words on paper.

Here is a poem produced by a student in my advanced composition class. Note, of course, the longer signs require more work, but students enjoy the process so much that those with longer signs actually have more fun searching, deleting, adding, sequencing, and shaping their poems.

"Capricorn"

Complete all projects.
Rearrange itinerary carefully;
Or,
Regret negligence.

Given the opportunity to generate language themselves, to string a few words coherently together, to discover connections among the developing intentions, and to arrange and shape the strings, students learn to approach poetry with a nurtured appreciation for what other poets have done. Students' own creative attempts serve as transitions for reading poetry better, more emphatically, and with greater pleasure.